

**FIRST PLACE WINNER**

**Student – Stephanie Kresloff**

**School – Thomas S. Wootton**

**Grade – 12**

**Essay Question – 3**

My twin brother Jake has always been atypical compared to other boys, although I did not always realize it. One of my fondest memories from my younger years is when I found Jake stealthily trying on the dresses and skirts that my mom had bought for me to wear. He paired my clothes with my mom's high heels, and whenever we would play Disney Princess, we would fight over who got to be the girl. Since I did not know any better, I did not object to him playing the feminine role, even though he was a boy. His behavior did not seem peculiar to me. Not until I thought to compare Jake to other boys my age did I notice that he was abnormal. And even then, I did not think anything of it. Later, his gender-bending preferences influenced me to think abstractly about the ways that men and women are "supposed" to behave.

Jake and I were in sixth grade when we first faced someone who simply decided that Jake's gender-bending preferences were unacceptable. The last bell had rung for the day, and Jake and I were talking to a teacher before we left the school. Waiting outside for us was a bully and two of his friends, who grabbed Jake's backpack as soon as we walked out of the classroom, and threw him against the wall. One of the boy's accomplices held Jake in place while the boy drew his fist back, about to hit him. Apparently, all they were trying to do was intimidate him, because when Jake's face twisted in a mixture of fear and horror, they let him go. As soon as he did, we both ran as fast as our legs could carry us to the counselor's office. Because of this event, Jake's fear of his own different sexuality was buried even deeper inside of him. Kids who come from limiting and perhaps bigoted backgrounds affect those who are different than distinct individuals with their insensitivity. From Jake's experience, I know it can make them feel that they are wrong for being who they are. Why dislike the way someone is, especially if their lifestyle does not affect you in the first place?

Unfortunately, all over the world people are cast aside, emotionally wounded, and murdered, simply for their differences. For example, there is Matthew Shepard, who was beaten to death by two homophobic men for being gay. The murder of Matthew Shepard instilled fear into members of the Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual/Transgender/Questioning community all over the world. How could they help but fear that other people would hate them just because of their sexual orientation, that they would end up tied up to a fence to die alone in the harsh, cold, winter? It is possible that a person who commits a hate crime sees himself as a hero, and the person they dislike a criminal? Supposedly for the greater good, they physically attack them, unable to tolerate a broader conception of the world. When I first heard about the Matthew Shepard case, I was appalled that this could ever happen. I could not understand why, in a person's mind, someone's difference is a reason to destroy him or her. Since then, I am certainly more cautious about sharing my personal beliefs. I am also worried for my brother. Will he end up as another example of a hate crime? I hope that by the time Jake and I entered the adult world, we will find a kinder community.

Because I have grown up in a home where strict gender roles are neither encouraged nor dispirited, I know I do not have limits that define what women and men are supposed to do or be. Men should not be confined to the workplace and only allowed to like sports and cars. And women – why should we stay in the kitchen when there are so many opportunities we could enjoy outside of taking care of the children and home? If a man or woman attempts to step out of the boundaries of societal norms, they are often ridiculed and they question themselves. I wish to help create a world in which gender is non-prescriptive, where men can like the color pink without being called gay, and where all of women's capacities and achievements are recognized.

By starting the Gay-Straight Alliance at my school, my twin brother and I have provided a safe haven for members of the LGBTQ community at our school. We make it clear that in our presence, they will not be judged or discriminated against. We do fun activities and get to know each other, but we also spread awareness about our cause and try to help people outside our club understand why slurs and discrimination hurts so much. We also help teenagers through the process of coming out, and have had many successful and happy endings.